

Participatory Democracy From the 1960s and SDS into the Future On-line
By Michael Hauben (written in 1995)

The 1960s was a time of people around the world struggling for more of a say in the decisions of their society. The emergence of the personal computer in the late 70s and early 80s and the longer gestation of the new forms of people-controlled communication facilitated by the Internet and Usenet in the late 80s and today are the direct descendents of 1960s.

The era of the 1960s was a special time in America. Masses of people realized their own potential to affect how the world around them worked. People rose up to protest the ways of society which were out of their control, whether to fight against racial segregation, or to gain more power for students in the university setting. The "Port Huron Statement" created by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was a document which helped set the mood for the decade.

By the 1970s, some of the people who were directly involved in student protests continued their efforts to bring power to the people by developing and spreading computer power in a form accessible and affordable to individuals. The personal computer movement of the 1970s created the personal computer. By the mid 1980s they forced the corporations to produce computers which everyone could afford. The new communications media of the Internet grew out of the ARPANET research that started in 1969 and Usenet which was born in 1979. These communications advances coupled with the availability of computers transforms the spirit of the 1960s into an achievable goal for our times.

SDS and THE NEED FOR PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

The early members of SDS found a real problem in American Society. They felt that the United States was a democracy that never existed, or rather which was transformed into a representative system after the constitutional convention. The United States society is called a democracy, but had ceased being democratic after the early beginnings of American society. SDS felt it is crucial for people to have a part in how their society is governed. SDS leaders had an understanding of democratic forms which did not function democratically in the 1960s nor do they today. This is a real problem which the leaders and members of SDS intuitively understood and worked to change.

An important part of the SDS program included the understanding of the need for a medium to make it possible for a community of active citizens to discuss and debate the issues affecting their lives. While not available in the 1960s, such a medium exists today in the 1990s. The seeds for the revival of the 1960s SDS vision of how to bring about a more democratic society now exists in the personal computer and the Net. These seeds will be an important element in the battle for winning control for people as we approach the new millennium.

THE PORT HURON STATEMENT and DEEP PROBLEMS WITH AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

The Port Huron Statement was the foundation on which to build a movement for participatory democracy in the 1960s. In June 1962, an

SDS national convention was held in a UAW camp located in the backwoods of Port Huron, Michigan. The original text of the Port Huron Statement was drafted by Tom Hayden, who was then SDS Field Secretary. The Statement sets out the theory of SDS's criticism of American society. The Port Huron convention was itself a concrete living example of the practice of participatory democracy.

The Port Huron Statement was originally thought of as a manifesto, but SDS members moved instead to call it a "statement". It was prefixed by an introductory note describing how it was to be a document that should develop and change with experience:

"This document represents the results of several months of writing and discussion among the membership, a draft paper, and revision by the Students for a Democratic Society national convention meeting in Port Huron, Michigan, June 11-15, 1962. It is presented as a document with which SDS officially identifies, but also as a living document open to change with our times and experiences. It is a beginning: in our own debate and education, in our dialogue with society."

(Port Huron Statement in Miller, p. 329)

This note is important in that it signifies that the SDS document was not defining the definite solution to the problems of society, but was making suggestions that would be open to experiences towards a better understanding. This openness is an important precursor to practicing participatory democracy by asking for the opinions of everyone and treating these various opinions equally.

The first serious problem inherent in American society identified by the Port Huron Statement is the myth of a functioning democracy:

"For Americans concerned with the development of democratic societies, the anti-colonial movements and revolutions in the emerging nations pose serious problems. We need to face the problems with humanity; after 180 years of constitutional government we are still striving for democracy in our own society."

(Port Huron Statement in Miller, p. 361)

This lack of democracy in American society contributes to the political disillusionment of the population. Tom Hayden and SDS were deeply influenced by the writings of C. Wright Mills, a philosopher who was a Professor at Columbia University until his death early in 1962. Mills' thesis was that the "the idea of the community of publics" which make up a democracy had disappeared as people increasingly got further away from politics. Mills felt that the disengagement of people from the State had resulted in control being given to a few who in the 1960s were no longer valid representatives of the American people. In his book about SDS, "Democracy is in the Streets", James Miller wrote:

"Politics became a spectator sport. The support of voters was marshaled through advertising campaigns, not direct participation in reasoned debate. A citizen's chief sources of political information, the mass media, typically assaulted him with a barrage of distracting commercial come-ons, feeble entertainments and hand-me-down glosses on complicated issues." (Miller, p. 85)

Such fundamental problems with democracy continue today in the middle of the 1990s. In the Port Huron Statement, SDS was successful in identifying and understanding the problems which still plague us today. This is a necessary first step to working towards a solution. The students involved with SDS understood people were tired of the problems and wanted to make changes in society. The Port Huron Statement was written to address these concerns:

"...do they not as well produce a yearning to believe there is an alternative to the present, that something can be done to change circumstances in the school, the workplaces, the bureaucracies, the government? It is to this latter yearning, at once the spark and engine of change, that we direct our present appeal. The search for a truly democratic alternatives to the present, and a commitment to social experimentation with them, is a worthy and fulfilling human enterprise, one which moves us, and we hope, others today."

(SDS, "The Introduction, Agenda for Change", p. 331)

Describing how the separation of people from power is the means used to keep people uninterested and apathetic, the Port Huron Statement explains:

"The apathy is, first, subjective -- the felt powerlessness of ordinary people, the resignation before the enormity of events. But subjective apathy is encouraged by the objective American situation -- the actual structural separation of people from power, from relevant knowledge, from pinnacles of decision-making. Just as the university influences the student way of life, so do major social institutions create the circumstances which the isolated citizen will try hopelessly to understand the world and himself."

("The Society Beyond" in the Port Huron Statement, in Miller, p. 336)

The Statement analyzes the personal disconnection to society and its effect:

"The very isolation of the individual -- from power and community and ability to aspire -- means the rise of democracy without publics. With the great mass of people structurally remote and psychologically hesitant with respect to democratic institutions, those institutions themselves attenuate and become, in the fashion of the vicious cycle, progressively less accessible to those few who aspire to serious participation in social affairs. The vital democratic connection between community and leadership, between the mass and the several elites, has been so wrenched and perverted that disastrous policies go unchallenged time and again."

(Port Huron Statement in Miller, p. 336)

The Statement describes how it is typical for people to get frustrated and quit going along with the electoral system as something which works. The problem has continued, as we now have all time lows in voter turn-outs for national and local elections. In a section titled Politics Without Publics, the Statement explains:

"The American voter is buffeted from all directions by pseudo-problems, by the structurally initiated sense that nothing political is subject to human mastery. Worried by his mundane problems which never get solved, but constrained by the common belief that politics is an agonizingly slow accommodation of views, he quits all pretense of bothering."

(Port Huron Statement in Miller, p. 337)

Students in SDS did not let these real problems discourage their efforts to work for a better future. They wanted to be part of the forces to defeat the problems. The Port Huron Statement contains an understanding that people are inherently good and can deal with the problems that were described. This understanding is conveyed in the Values section of the Statement:

"Men have unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity. It is this potential that we regard as crucial and to which we appeal, not to the human potential for violence, unreason, and submission to authority. The goal of man and society should be human independence: a concern not with the image of popularity but with finding a meaning in life that is personally authentic; a quality of mind not compulsively driven by a sense of powerlessness, nor one which unthinkingly adopts status values, nor one which represses all threats to its habits, but one which easily unites the fragmented parts of personal history, one which openly faces problems which are troubling and unresolved; one with an intuitive awareness of possibilities, an active sense of curiosity, an ability and willingness to learn."

(Port Huron Statement in Miller, p. 332)

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Those participating in the Port Huron convention came away with a sense of the importance of participatory democracy. This sense was in the air in several ways. The convention itself embodied participatory democracy through the discussion and debate over the text of the Statement as several people later explained. The Port Huron Statement called for the implementation of participatory democracy as a way to bring people back into decisions about the country in general, and their individual lives, in particular. One of Tom Hayden's professors at University of Michigan, Arnold Kaufman, came to speak about his thoughts and use of phrase 'participatory democracy.'

Miller writes that in a 1960 essay, "Participatory Democracy and Human Nature", Kaufman had described a society in which every member had a "direct responsibility for decisions." The "main justifying function" of participatory democracy, quotes Miller, "is and always has been, not the extent to which it protects or stabilizes a community, but the contribution it can make to the development of human powers of thought, feeling and action. In this respect, it differs, and differs quite fundamentally, from a representative system incorporating all sorts of institutional features designed to safeguard human rights and ensure social order." (Miller, p. 94)

"Participation" explained Kaufman, "means both personal initiative -- that men feel obliged to help resolve social problems -- and social opportunity -- that society feels obliged to maximize the possibility for personal initiative to find creative outlets." (Miller, p. 95)

A participant at the Port Huron Conference, Richard Flacks remembers Arnold Kaufman speaking at the convention, "At one point, he declared that our job as citizens was not to role-play the President. Our job was to put forth our own perspective. That was the real meaning of democracy--press for your own perspective as you see it, not trying to be a statesman understanding the big picture." (Miller, p. 111)

After identifying participatory democracy as the means of how to wrest control back from corporate and government bureaucracies, the next step was to identify the means to having participatory democracy. In the "Values" section of The Port Huron Statement, the means proposed is a new media that would make this possible:

"As a social system we seek the establishment of a democracy of individual participation governed by two central aims: that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; the society be organized to encourage independence in men and provide the media for their common participation." (Port Huron Statement in Miller, p. 333)

Others in SDS further detailed their understandings of participatory democracy to mean people becoming active and committed to playing more of a public role. Miller documents Al Haber's idea of democracy as "a model, another way of organizing society." The emphasis was on a charge to action. It was how to be out there doing. Rather than an ideology or a theory." (Miller, pp. 143-144)

Tom Hayden, Miller writes, understood participatory democracy to mean:

"number one, action; we believed in action. We had behind us the so-called decade of apathy; we were emerging from apathy. What's the opposite of apathy? Active participation. Citizenship. Making history. Secondly, we were very directly influenced by the civil rights movement in its student phase, which believed that by personally committing yourself and taking risks, you could enter history and try to change it after a hundred years of segregation. And so it was this element of participation in democracy that was important. Voting was not enough. Having a democracy in which you have an apathetic citizenship, spoon-fed information by a monolithic media, periodically voting, was very weak, a declining form of democracy. And we believed, as an end in itself, to make the human being whole by becoming an actor in history instead of just a passive object. Not only as an end in itself, but as a means to change, the idea of participatory democracy was our central focus." (Miller, p. 144)

Another member of SDS, Sharon Jeffrey understood "Participatory" to mean "involved in decisions." She continued, "And I definitely wanted to be involved in decisions that were going to affect me! How could I

let anyone make a decision about me that I wasn't involved in?"
(Miller, p. 144)

It is important to see the value of participatory democracy as a common understanding among both the leaders and members of SDS. While the Port Huron Statement contained other criticisms and thoughts, its major contribution was to highlight the need to more actively involve the citizens of the United States in the daily political process to correct some of the wrongs which passivity had allowed to build. Richard Flacks summarizes this in his article, "On the Uses of Participatory Democracy":

"The most frequently heard phrase for defining participatory democracy is that 'men must share in the decisions which affect their lives.' in other words, participatory democrats take seriously a vision of man as citizen: and by taking seriously such a vision, they seek to extend the conception of citizenship beyond the conventional political sphere to all institutions. Other ways of stating the core values are to assert the following: each man has responsibility for the action of the institutions in which he is embedded" (Flacks, pp. 397-398)

THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY FOR PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

The leaders of SDS strove to create forms of participatory democracy within its structure and organization as a prototype and as leadership for the student protest movement and society in general. Al Haber, the University of Michigan graduate student who was the first SDS national officer, describes the need for a communication system to provide the foundation for the movement:

"The challenge ahead is to appraise and evolve radical alternatives to the inadequate society of today, and to develop an institutionalized communication system that will give perspective to our immediate actions. We will then have the groundwork for a radical student movement in America." (Sale, p. 25)

He understood the general society would be the last place to approach. There was a need to start smaller among the element of society that was becoming more active in the 1960s or the students. Haber outlined his idea of where to start:

"We do not now have such a public [interaction in a functioning community] in America. Perhaps, among the students, we are beginning to approach it on the left. It is now the major task before liberals, radicals, socialists and democrats. It is a task in which the SDS should play a major role." (Miller, p.69)

The Port Huron Statement defines 'community' to mean:

"Human relations should involve fraternity and honesty. Human interdependence is a contemporary fact; Personal links between man and man are needed.'" (SDS, p. 332)

Prior to his full time involvement with SDS, Hayden wrote an article for the Michigan Daily describing how democratic decision making is a necessary first step towards creating community. Hayden's focus was on the University when he wrote, "If decisions are

the sole work of an isolated few rather than of a participating many, alienation from the University complex will emerge, because the University will be just that: a complex, not a community." However, this sentiment persisted in Hayden's and others thoughts about community and democracy for the whole country. (Miller, p. 54)

This feeling about community is represented in the Port Huron Statement's conclusion. The Statement calls for the communal sharing of problems to see that they are public and not private problems. Only by communicating and sharing these problems through a community will it be a chance to solve them together. SDS called for the new left to "transform modern complexity into issues that can be understood and felt close-up by every human being." The statement continues, "It must give form to the feelings of helplessness and indifference, so people may see the political, social and economic sources of their private troubles and organize to change society..." (Port Huron Statement, p. 374 of Miller)

The theory of participatory democracy was engaging. However, the actual practice of giving everyone a say within the SDS structures made the value of participatory democracy clear. The Port Huron Convention was a real life example of how the principles were refreshing and capable of bringing American citizens back into political process. The community created among SDS members brought this new spirit to light. C. Wright Mills writings spoke about "the scattered little circles of face-to-face citizens discussing their public business." Al Haber's hope for this to happen among students was demonstrated at Port Huron. SDS members saw this as proof of Mills' hope for democracy. This was to be the first example of many among SDS gatherings and meetings. Richard Flacks highlighted what made Port Huron special. He found a "mutual discovery of like minds." Flacks continued, "You felt isolated before, because you had these political interests and values and suddenly you were discovering not only like minds, but the possibility of actually creating something together." It was also exciting because, "it was our thing: we were there at the beginning." (Miller, p. 118)

THE MEANS FOR CHANGE

SDS succeeded in doing several things. First, they clearly identified the crucial problem in American democracy. Next, they came up with an understanding of what theory would make a difference. All that remained was to find the means to make this change manifest. They discovered how to create changes in their own lives and these changes affected the world around them. However, something more was needed to bring change to all of American society.

Al Haber understood this something more would be an open communication system or media which people could use to communicate. He understood that, "the challenge ahead is to appraise and evolve radical alternatives to the inadequate society of today, and to develop an institutionalized communication system that will give perspective to our immediate actions." (Sale, p. 25) This system would lay the "the groundwork for a radical student movement in America." (Sale, p. 25) Haber and Hayden understood SDS to be this, "a national communications network" (Miller, p. 72)

While many people made their voices heard and produced a real effect on the world in the 1960s, lasting structural changes were not established. The real problems outlined earlier continued in the 1970s and afterwards. A national, or even international, public communications network needed to be built to keep the public's voice out in the open.

Members of SDS partially understood this, and put forth the following two points in the Port Huron Statement section on "Towards American Democracy":

- "Mechanisms of voluntary association must be created through which political information can be imparted and political participation encouraged."

- "The allocation of resources must be based on social needs. A truly 'public sector' must be established, and its nature debated and planned." (PHS, in Miller, p. 362)

INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS NETWORK - OR THE NET

This network and the means to access it began developing towards the end of the 1960s. Two milestones in the genesis were 1969 when the first ARPANET node was installed and in 1979 when Usenet started. Both are pioneering experiments in using computers to facilitate human communication in a fundamentally different way than already existing public communications networks like the telephone or television networks. The ARPANET, which was a prototype for today's Internet, and Usenet, which continues to grow and expand around the world, are parts of the Net, or the worldwide global computer communication networks. Another important step towards the development of an international communication network was the personal computer movement, which took place in the middle to late 1970s. This movement created the personal computer which makes it affordable for an individual to purchase the means to connect to this public network.

However, the network can not simply be created. SDS understood that "democracy and freedom do not magically occur, but have roots in historical experience; they cannot always be demanded for any society at any time, but must be nurtured and facilitated." (SDS, Port Huron Statement, in Miller, p. 361)

Participants on the ARPANET, Internet and Usenet inherently understood this, and built a social and knowledge network from the ground up. As Usenet was created to help students who did not have access to the ARPANET, or a chance to communicate in a similar way, they came to it in full force. In "Culture and Communication: The Interplay in the New Public Commons", Michael Hauben writes that the on-line user is part of a global culture and considers him or herself to be a global citizen. This global citizen is a net citizen, or a Netizen. The world which has developed is based on communal effort to make a cooperative community. Those who have become Netizens have gained more control of their lives and the world around them. However, access to this world needs to spread in order to have the largest possible effect for the most number of people. In addition, as some efforts to spread the Net become more commercial, some of the values important to the Net are being challenged.

A recent speech I was invited to present at a conference on "the Netizen Revolution and the Regional Information Infrastructure" in Beppu, Japan helps to bring the world of the Netizen into perspective with the ideas of participatory democracy,

"Netizens are not just anyone who comes on-line, and they are especially not people who come on-line for isolated gain or profit. They are not people who come to the Net thinking it is a service. Rather they are people who understand it takes effort and action on each and everyone's part to make the Net a regenerative and vibrant community and resource. Netizens are people who decide to devote time and effort into making the Net, this new part of our world, a better place." (Hauben, Hypernetwork '95 speech)

The Net is a technological and social development which is in the spirit of the theory clearly defined by the Students for a Democratic Society. This understanding could help in the fight to keep the Net a uncommercialized public commons (Felsenstein). This many to many medium provides the tools necessary to bring the open commons needed to make participatory democracy a reality. It is important now to spread access to this medium to all who understand they could benefit.

The Net brings power to people's lives because it is a public forum. The airing of real problems and concerns in the open brings help towards the solution and makes those responsible accountable to the general public. The Net is the public distribution of people's muckraking and whistle blowing. It is also just a damn good way for people to come together to communicate about common interests and to come into contact with people with similar and differing ideas.

The lack of control over the events surrounding an individual's life was a common concern of protesters in the 1960s. The Port Huron Statement gave this as a reason for the reforms SDS was calling for. The section titled "The Society Beyond" included that "Americans are in withdrawal from public life, from any collective efforts at directing their own affairs." (PHS, in Miller, p. 335)

Hayden echoed C. Wright Mills when he wrote, "What experience we have is our own, not vicarious or inherited." Hayden continued, "We keep believing that people need to control, or try to control, their work and their life. Otherwise, they are without intensity, without the subjective creative consciousness of themselves which is the root of free and secure feeling. It may be too much to believe, we don't know." (Miller, p. 262)

The desire to bring more control into people's daily life was a common goal of student protest in the 1960s. Mario Savio, active in the Berkeley Free Speech movement, "believed that the students, who paid the university to educate them, should have the power to influence decisions concerning their university lives." (Haskins and Benson, p. 55) This desire was also a common motivator of the personal computer movement.

THE PERSONAL COMPUTER MOVEMENT

The personal computer movement immediately picked up after the protest movements of the 1960s died down. Hobbyist computer enthusiasts wanted to provide access to computing power to the people. People across the United States picked up circuit boards and worked on making a personal mini-computer or mainframe which previously only large corporations and educational institutions could afford. Magazines, such as Creative Computing, Byte and Dr. Dobbs' Journal, and clubs, such as the Homebrew Club, formed cooperative communities of people working towards solving the technical problems of building a personal and inexpensive computer.

Several pioneers of the personal computer movement contributed to the tenth anniversary issue of Creative Computing Magazine. Some of their impressions follow:

"The people involved were people with vision, people who stubbornly clung to the idea that the computers could offer individuals advantages previously available only to large corporations. ..."
(Leyland, p. 111)

"Computer power was meant for the people. In the early 70s computer cults were being formed across the country. Sol Libes on the East Coast and Gordon French in the West were organizing computer enthusiasts into clubs...." (Terrell, p. 100)

"We didn't have many things you take for granted today, but we did have a feeling of excitement and adventure. A feeling that we were the pioneers in a new era in which small computers would free everyone from much of the drudgery of everyday life. A feeling that we were secretly taking control of information and power jealously guarded by the Fortune 500 owners of multi-million dollar IBM mainframes. A feeling that the world would never be the same once "hobby computers" really caught on." (Marsh, p. 110)

"There was a strong feeling [at the Homebrew Club] that we were subversives. We were subverting the way the giant corporations had run things. We were upsetting the establishment, forcing our mores into the industry. I was amazed that we could continue to meet without people arriving with bayonets to arrest the lot of us." (

THE NET and CONCLUSION

The development of the Internet and of Usenet is an investment in a strong force towards making direct democracy a reality. These new technologies present the chance to overcome the obstacles preventing the implementation of direct democracy. Online communication forums also make possible the discussion necessary to identify today's fundamental questions. One criticism is that it would be impossible to assemble the body politic in person at a single time. The Net allows for a meeting which takes place on each person's own time, rather than all at one time. Usenet newsgroups are discussion forums where questions are raised, and people can leave comments when convenient, rather than at a particular time and at a particular place. As a computer discussion forum, individuals can connect from their own computers, or from publicly accessible computers across the nation to participate in a particular debate. The discussion takes place in one concrete time and place, while the discussants can be

dispersed. Current Usenet newsgroups and mailing lists prove that citizens can both do their daily jobs and participate in discussions that interest them within their daily schedules.

Another criticism was that people would not be able to communicate peacefully after assembling. Online discussions do not have the same characteristics as in-person meetings. As people connect to the discussion forum when they wish, and when they have time, they can be thoughtful in their responses to the discussion. Whereas in a traditional meeting, participants have to think quickly to respond. In addition, online discussions allow everyone to have a say, whereas finite length meetings only allow a certain number of people to have their say. Online meetings allow everyone to contribute their thoughts in a message, which is then accessible to whomever else is reading and participating in the discussion.

These new communication technologies hold the potential for the implementation of direct democracy in a country as long as the necessary computer and communications infrastructure are installed. Future advancement towards a more responsible government is possible with these new technologies. While the future is discussed and planned for, it will also be possible to use these technologies to assist in the citizen participation in government. Netizens are watching various government institutions on various newsgroups and mailing lists throughout the global computer communications network. People's thoughts about and criticisms of their respective governments are being aired on the currently uncensored networks.

These networks can revitalize the concept of a democratic "Town Meeting" via online communication and discussion. Discussions involve people interacting with others. Voting involves the isolated thoughts of an individual on an issue, and then his or her acting on those thoughts in a private vote. In society where people live together, it is important for people to communicate with each other about their situations to best understand the world from the broadest possible viewpoint.

The individuals involved with SDS, the personal computer movement and the pioneers involved with the development of the Net understood they were a part of history. This spirit helped them to push forward in the hard struggle needed to bring the movements to fruition. The invention of the personal computer was one step that made it possible for people to afford the means to connect to the Net. The Internet has just begun to emerge as a tool available to the public. It is important that the combination of the personal computer and the Net be spread and made widely available at low or no costs to people around the world. It is important to understand the tradition which these developments have come from, in order to truly understand their value to society and to make them widely available. With the hope connected to this new public communications medium, I encourage people to take up the struggle which continues in the great American radical tradition.

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